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ABSTRACT

Needs assessment is a process for identifying discrepancies between existing conditions and desired conditions. This manual details six major steps for carrying out needs assessment in a school system, along with 19 tasks and 59 subtasks. The six steps are: 1) initiate the needs assessment process; 2) conduct assessment of perceived needs; 3) verify perceived needs by objective means; 4) determine systemwide needs priorities; 5) choose needs to be addressed by improvement effort; 6) conduct a causal analysis of the needs to be improved. (Author/LD)

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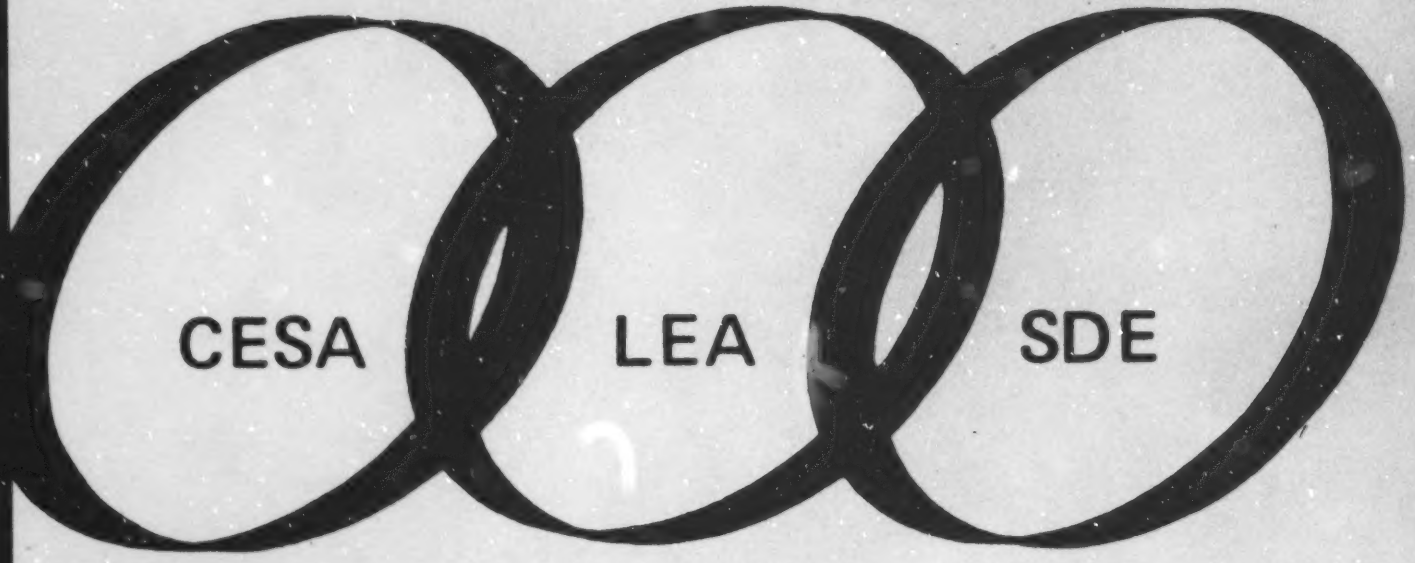
Needs Assessment: User's Manual



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EA 012 356

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INTRODUCTION

Who can use this publication?

The needs assessment process discussed in this publication is designed for use at the school district level to enable a team of school system representatives to identify high priority system needs. This team, which will be referred to as the Needs Assessment Core Committee, would either be appointed by the superintendent or Board of Education, or be selected by a process approved of by the superintendent and/or Board. The team should consist of a combination of members from these groups: system administrators, teachers, counselors, community representatives and perhaps students. This publication is directed toward those regular educational decision-makers and practitioneers who will conduct the needs assessment, rather than theorists or research specialists.

Why conduct a system-wide needs assessment?

A system-wide needs assessment is a process for identifying discrepancies between existing conditions and desired conditions in a school system. Such discrepancies may manifest themselves as problems, unattained goals or mere "gut feelings" about what needs to be improved. They may be learner needs, institutional needs, or both.

Needs assessment has become accepted as the "front end" of educational planning and evaluation leading to educational change and program modification. More specific reasons for doing a needs assessment are:

1. Students are the reason for schools operating, and school systems must be able to identify student needs to lay the groundwork for more rational curricular planning.

2. Needs assessment data can help make more defensible choices among program alternatives. A methodical approach prevents leaping to solutions on the basis of scanty analysis or evidence.

3. The assessment, if addressed to future and long-range needs as well as current ones, will provide for renewal in the school. By conducting a needs assessment, districts will be developing a data base for future educational decisions and establishing a resource bank of information on the district for continued evaluation.

4. Needs assessment should provide direction for placing priorities on allocation of scarce resources. A good needs assessment will help find the causes of the difficulties and set priorities for corrective action.

5. Needs assessment demands involvement of the people who support a school system. By involving various constituent groups in the process, the system is likely to find more acceptance of the resulting plans and policies than if administrators alone assessed the needs and made the decisions. When dissident as well as supportive groups are given a voice, and their participation is invited in a constructive fashion, there is a better chance of reaching consensus on the areas of greatest need and on proposals to meet those needs.

6. Needs assessments can result in more accurate information for planning in special areas, such as education of the handicapped, health and guidance services, career and vocational education, needs of minority language and cultural groups, and multicultural education for all.

7. Needs assessment may help meet mandates defined in state and federal legislation or help to obtain state and federal funding.

8. Unexpected or hidden needs and causes of ongoing or unresolved problems may emerge. Revealing discrepancies of various kinds among the perceptions of different groups—e.g., parents, students, educators, business people—as to how well the school is performing its job may be uncovered.

What process is described in this publication?

There is no one "right" way to do a needs assessment. School districts which have implemented needs assessment have done so from a variety of levels of sophistication and purpose. In the last decade there has been a proliferation of models, tools, instruments, strategies and kits for assessing educational needs in various institutional settings and school levels.[1]

The needs assessment process described here is based on six important considerations:

1. Needs assessment is neither a confusing nor mysterious process; a planning group can combine simplicity and usefulness to help identify and solve problems.

2. The over-worked administrator, faced with an assessment, wants "an instrument" and wants it to provide the most pay-off for the least expenditure of time and effort.

3. It is not necessary for a school system to expend most of its initial energies on generating and ranking goals.

4. School problems often can be more accurately identified and clarified by first gathering felt needs data and then validating with more objective data.[2]

5. Needs may appear in all sorts of shapes and sizes — some are comprehensive and some narrow, some are long range while others are immediate.[3]

6. Needs indicate problems, but do not necessarily shed light on the causes or solutions to the problems.

The approach described here deals with the above considerations, makes provisions for alternative actions, yet still represents one complete process. In developing this approach, features of other needs assessment models were employed when possible. This document describes how to complete each task listed in the accompanying **Checklist of Steps.** It is a strong recommendation of the authors that the present **Users Manual** be read in concert with the **Checklist of Steps.** This will help to further clarify the process for the reader.

The process consists of six major steps moving from a broad look at school system needs to a focussed inquiry into the most pressing and addressable need(s). This refinement process culminates in the determination of probable *causes* of specific needs. The approach is characterized by movement from a wide-ranging analysis of perceptions to target group consensus on need priorities.

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[1]The **Resource Guide** which accompanies this publication describes alternative needs assessment approaches currently in use.

[2]Felt, or perceived, needs are those subjectively expressed by individuals or groups of individuals as being needed. Objective, or hard data, such as test scores, can be used to confirm or verify perceived observations.

[3]In addition, needs are sometimes confused with desired goals.

During the initial stages of the process, the "felt" needs of a cross-section of educational practitioneers and consumers are compiled. Respondents may identify needs based on a consideration of: existing system goals, desired goals, perceptions of problems or readily available lists of needs or goals from other settings. Felt needs could be broad concerns or narrow; some might be directed to learner needs while others have a process focus. The major thrust is to, simply and efficiently, compile lists of high priority needs based squarely on the specific concerns of a cross-section of administrators, teachers and students. These perceived needs are subsequently verified by hard data,[4] combined into one list and re-submitted to the original target groups and other important groups of respondents to rank the needs in order of importance. In addition, they are organized according to system-wide priorities; a small number of needs (one or two) are then selected for remediation and those needs are scrutinized for probable causes.

Needs may be stated directly in terms of student outcomes or be put in terms of some problem condition in planning, teacher or administrative training, evaluation or materials acquisition. Needs may be identified in the areas of curriculum, resources, staff or management. Needs may center at the classroom, school or district level or may constitute a broader concern across a combination of levels and/or areas.

The needs assessment process described in this publication aims to answer two questions:

1. What are effective, proven needs assessment procedures?

2. What have experience and research shown to be the most logical, practical approaches used by school systems conducting needs assessments in Georgia?

Most of the generally accepted models of needs assessment and all of the formal literature on the process have school systems beginning with a statement of educational philosophy and developing lists of overall goals and detailed objectives. The discrepancy between stated goals and actual achievement of those goals then becomes the definition of "need." Three years' experience with 38 Georgia school systems in the Georgia RDU Project has demonstrated that, while such a starting point may be theoretically preferred, it seldom works out in actual practice. Developing an educational philosophy with corresponding goals and objectives, when done well, is often a long, laborous process which can turn an entire educational community against the improvement process in the very beginning. A well-developed philosophy, goals and objectives are critical in conducting system-wide comprehensive planning; but the present process is narrower in scope: the identification of specifically defined problems, the selection of appropriate solutions, and their implementation. The process starts right out with two questions for the educational community to answer:

1. What do you think are our most pressing school problems?

2. How would you go about solving these problems?

The rest of this document is organized so that the needs assessment implementer(s) can easily locate a description of each task listed in the accompanying **Checklist**. It is recommended that this **Checklist** be used *both* to guide the needs assessment process and to verify at the end that all important aspects have been acted upon or considered. When specific instruments, prototypes or other documents are referenced, they will be found in the **Resource Guide**.

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[4]Scrutinized by objective means such as test scores in order to accept, reject or re-state.

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step 1

Initiate the Needs Assessment Process

This step entails gearing up for the needs assessment: selecting needs assessment committee members (the core committee), orienting them and formulating tentative plans.

☐ **Task I: Establish a core committee**

Needs assessment is too complicated a task to be assigned to one person. The process is an opportunity to encourage meaningful involvement from a cross section of educational and community constituents, people who might otherwise criticize the process if they were not involved. A workable committee size usually ranges from 5 to 15 members. The committee should be based on the widest possible representation. Representatives from these groups should be considered: board of education, teachers, administrators (central and building level), counselors, parents, students and civic leaders. At the minimum, key staff should include representation from instructional, administrative and support service areas. An attempt should be made to include individuals who are recognized as leaders among their peers.

Committee selection criteria should also consider a balance in the following areas: roles to be fulfilled, current functions of personnel, subject areas, grade levels, personal philosophies, time available and physical location of each prospective member. The Core Committee will be a working committee not just a decision-making one. Each member should be prepared to make a major commitment to the project.

Two persons are critical to the functioning of the committee: the *coordinator* and a *resource person*. The core committee should have a coordinator who is acceptable to the committee and the administration. This person should be prepared to be spokesman for the project. The success of the project depends heavily on the coordinator's ability to involve people in the process. Sufficient released time must be granted in order for the coordinator to perform the required duties. This person probably will be full-time for a substantial part of the school year. Careful thought should be given to the qualifications of the core committee chairman. Some considerations are:

1. Leadership capabilities—The coordinator needs to be a leader with a clear delegation of authority.

2. Free access to the superintendent and others—Working with the superintendent and principals to seek advice and to get the best-qualified persons to serve on the core committee is critical.

3. Ability to work well with others—Joining work-study sessions frequently to provide consultation and inspiration is important. Visiting personnel during their work sessions will demonstrate the chairman's deep interest in all facets of the study.

4. Ability to communicate—Providing the district's administrative and teaching staff with regular (monthly) progress reports of the needs assessment is essential to keep the system's leaders knowledgeable and equipped to handle any questions arising from teachers and parents.

While it is recommended that the system superintendent not chair the steering committee because of his or her many other time-consuming obligations, it is essential that he/she be kept up-to-date on the process. The coordinator should be prepared to report directly to the Board of Education. If the Superintendent prefers to do this, it still will be the responsibility of the chairman to submit the progress information required for the Board.

Careful attention should be directed to the question: "To what degree will needs assessment be an arm of administration?" Two *different* opinions related to this concern center on the selection of the coordinator:

1. The coordinator should be chosen by the superintendent and probably be close to the superintendent since he or she is directly or indirectly responsible for the effort and must defend it before the board. It is essential that the administration be committed to change if the study indicates the necessity. Therefore, the coordinator should probably come from the administrative echelon (assistant superintendent, principal, central office staff, or curriculum director).

2. The coordinator should be accorded a certain degree of independence from the dictates of the administration in order to be able to lead a committee which is truly a cross-section of the educational community and not just an arm of the administration. In this way, biases and special interests of the group can be balanced. Consequently, a classroom teacher might qualify for this role if such a teacher is a recognized leader.

Another important consideration in the formation of the committee is whether to identify a resource consultant to facilitate the conduct of the assessment. If the committee coordinator has adequate skills in all project aspects, then hiring or selecting a resource consultant might not be necessary. However, hiring a consultant has several advantages: the consultant is free of existing internal politics or constraints, able to apply a variety of strategies to the situation; not bound by the nitty-gritty day-to-day operations of the system, able to "open doors" which may be closed to the insider, and brings to the task assessment skills which others might not possess and an "aura of expertise."

Hiring a consultant also has its disadvantages. The disadvantages incude the natural resistance toward an outsider coming into a school or district; a consultant is not aware of previous actions or events which may affect the outcome of the project; a leadership void may exist once the consultant has completed his task; and internal commitment may not be present if the project is considered the consultant's.

The final decision on this question must be site specific, i.e., it depends on the circumstances, finances and political climate of the school or district in question. The nature of a needs assessment may require the input of someone well versed in the area of survey instrument development and application, as well as data analysis. If such a person exists in the district/school, use him or her; if not, a qualified consultant can be contracted. Qualifications might include experience in educational evaluation, data collection, instrument usage and/or development, and data analysis. The consultant can attend core committee and sub-committee sessions or he/she might be called on for presentations to the group during events such as the committee orientation. The resource person must have a functional knowledge of the needs assessment process and the tools and resources available in this packet. It is possible that the coordinator could also function as resource person. More likely, the resource person would be a CESA, university or State Department consultant.

Some committee functions and prerogatives may need to be clarified before members are selected in order to insure representatives capable of completing each task. Potential committee functions are described below under Task 3, **Make Tentative Plans.** Conducting the needs assessment requires the collection of a lot of data, and functions should be carefully described to facilitate delegation of responsibilities.

Assigning roles for the core committee will be the next task. The amount and type of involvement of committee members will differ according to the functions to be performed throughout the needs assessment. One suggestion is to develop a profile of members and match their talents to required roles. Problems of social bias, inadequate cross-cultural communication, or generation gaps can often be prevented or dealt with by appropriate representation on the Needs Assessment Core Committee. Consider representation from these groups:

1. Board of Education member — It may be desirable for a board member to serve as a liaison between the Board and Core Committee. If this is not the case, then a former board member may serve on the committee. Knowledge of board and community activities is a strength such a person can bring to the efforts of the needs assessment.

2. Administration — A principal or assistant principal can represent the views of his colleagues and contribute as a school head.

3. Special Service Personnel — Curriculum directors, psychologists, visiting teachers, speech therapists, etc., represent a view of education from the standpoint of system services.

4. Guidance — Since any needs assessment will require information pertaining to students' past, present, and future, it is essential that guidance personnel be represented as they usually have immediate access to this information.

5. Media — With the increased emphasis on media in education programs it is essential that this area be considered.

6. Vocational Programs — The idea of the comprehensive school has made it essential that both the vocational and academic programs be considered together. In many cases, educators representing speciality areas—administration, guidance, media, classroom teacher—are lacking in information specific to vocational education. Therefore, it is important to consider someone from this area.

7. Teacher — The classroom teacher in reading, mathematics, science, music, physical education, art, English, industrial arts, etc., may contribute toward the committee work by offering an in-depth understanding of a specific subject area.

8. Student — One or two representatives from student organizations or different ethnic groups could do much to help determine the needs of a system/school.

9. Community — It is imperative that the lay public participate in this study. Considerations for their selection should include:

   a. socio-economic background
   b. ethnic background
   c. civic participation
   d. business interests

10. Parent Organization(s) — Membership in parent organizations usually indicates a concern for children. Selection from a parent organization will help to insure representation by an active parent on the committee.

11. Teacher Organization(s) — Such a person can reflect the views of teacher organizations which have been established as collective spokesmen for the school system's teachers.

12. Civic Organizations — The leadership of a community is usually represented in its organizations. It might be wise to draw from these civic organizations when doing a needs assessment since they would have access to information relevant to the future of the community and its needs.

13. Superintendent — It would be expected that the system's chief executive may join, as time permits, any of the activities of the core committee.

The composition of specific sub-committees is discussed in **Task 3, Make Tentative Plans,** of this Step. A sample letter inviting prospective committee members to participate is contained in the **Resource Guide** (Part 2).

While it is recommended that the Core Committee not be larger than fifteen, the actual size must be determined by the system/school performing the needs assessment. To do so, some people may represent multiple categories (ex: a teacher may also be head of community organization). Since everyone selected should show a willingness and have the time necessary to actively participate, each must know how much time will be expected and what type of tasks are to be accomplished.

A successful needs assessment must have the full support of the board of education. This support must not only consist of approval and formal resolutions, but also the dispersement of funds for purchasing necessary materials. In some cases, released time and physical facilities must be approved. It is recommended that board members be encouraged to participate in the needs assessment as much as possible and that the entire board be kept informed as to the progress being made each step of the way.

☐ **Task 2: Orient the committee to the overall needs assessment process**

It is extremely important that the committee be cognizant of the full extent of the project and how to go about each task. Some form of training for the committee is a necessity, particularly a review of the processes presented in this packet (the six steps). This might begin with a preliminary look at products, target groups, instruments and data analysis. The resource person can assume a major role in the orientation and do much of the briefing. All members should

understand the various activities that are part of the needs assessment process, and group consensus on the overall thrust should be obtained. The coordinator and resource person need to become aware of the strengths and limitations of committee members so that leadership responsibilities can begin to be assigned.

An initial part of orientation should be a discussion on why the needs assessment is being done and what will happen to the data once it is collected. Orientation activities might also include:

1. Reviewing the components/elements of a comprehensive needs assessment. (These are referred to in **Task 3, Make Tentative Plans.**)

2. Looking at school system goals, if they exist.

3. Reviewing alternative designs for needs assessment.

4. Discussing how to create a favorable climate towards needs assessment.

5. Listing committee resources and constraints, prerogatives and restrictions.

To perform adequately, the needs assessment committee should know how the necessary funds, secretarial help, physical work space, consultants, data analysis, printing reports and instruments, postage for surveys, commercial materials to be used, expendable supplies, and released time will be worked out.

Secretarial assistance might consist of one or more full or part time workers as determined by the purpose and comprehensiveness of the needs assessment. A work area large enough for the entire committee and/or its sub-committees should be provided. This area should offer a good work environment as well as privacy from outside noise and interference and contain sufficient tables and chairs, adequate supplies (paper, pencils, etc.), and a chalkboard and/or means for utilization of media presentations. It is also essential that a space be reserved for the storage of all needs assessment supplies and materials. While it is imperative that needs assessment not interfere with the on-going educational process, occasions will arise when faculty members must be released from institutional duties. Therefore, it is important that such possibilities be considered before hand so absences from class or other duties will not create unnecessary problems.

Orientation is also a time that lessons learned from other needs assessment efforts can be reviewed and discussed. Discussion might include these topics:

1. All teachers and administrators are not mentally, physically or emotionally ready for the rigors of change.

2. The acceptance of shared decision making is an important ingredient in the acceptance of needs assessment and the establishment of a climate for successful change.

3. The most detrimental force affecting the completion of the needs assessment process and the development of potential change is teacher fatigue.

4. The building leader, i.e., the principal, must be totally committed and involved in the process. There is often a natural conflict between the impetus for change and the generic characteristics of the school principal.

5. If an outside consultant or facilitator is used in the conduct of the needs assessment, then consideration must be given to the development of emergent leadership from the staff so that the staff can assume leadership positions once the consultant leaves.

6. Public school educators are "turned off" by all the theory which is thrust upon them by "outsiders," who may not be aware of or have experienced-the day-to-day frustrations and pressures of public school administration. Seldom is a public school administrator fortunate enough to be able to conduct a needs assessment process in a theoretically pure sense. The public school administrator must ask, therefore: is a needs assessment worth doing if it isn't possible or practical to implement a pure model, i.e., one that the textbooks might talk about? *[The answer to this question must be yes, a definite yes!]*

Orientation should also include a discussion about how and when to conduct meetings and a framework for decision making (e.g. should agendas be sent out and minutes kept, should regularly scheduled meetings be held or should they be held only when decisions need to be made or activities organized). Since needs assessment is basically a communication process, perhaps public media representatives should participate in parts of the initial orientation.

In laying the groundwork for future working relations, the initial orientation is never a completed process. Each new step of the six step process presented in the **Checklist** should begin with a brief overview on the elements and tasks of that step presented to the committee by the coordinator or resource person. Thus, specific committee staff development, being spread over the whole period of the needs assessment process, will be more relevant to immediate tasks.

☐ Task 3: Make Tentative Plans

The committee will be responsible for making decisions about the strategy and parameters of needs assessment as well as performing specific duties. During this task a comprehensive strategy for determining needs is created. Needs assessment elements including procedures, types of needs statements, target groups, sampling, instruments, information collection, data analysis and communication plans are discussed. The comprehensiveness of the local plan is determined and the components recommended in this document are ratified or altered. Individual sub-committee member assignments are determined and tentative timelines set. A list of proposed dissemination products can also be generated. Such planning may take anywhere from one to five days (or meetings).

A needs assessment design does not have to be a formalized research project to be useful. But such a process should cover at least eight components. These components are listed and discussed on the next few pages.[5]

Component 1. **Target Audiences**

Determine *who* will identify the system needs and how such persons will be surveyed. Foremost in consideration is what groups are effecting and affected by educational policies. No matter what procedures are identified, involvement on the part of the educational public is a primary ingredient. It is recommended that the publics surveyed include at a minimum (1) administrators, (2) teachers and (3) students, and that a process for informing them and gaining their support be considered as part of this general planning model. Keeping these and other groups informed about the project is a valuable way to gain support and insure the opportunity for continuous input. Once the plan is approved, do everything to inform the district of the plan's intent and processes. An information release can be sent directly to the educational staff and, at the same time, be presented to the community at large via the local news media. An evening public meeting might be helpful for a presentation. Consider coordinating public relations procedures through the Superintendent's office. The Superintendent is the first person who will be sought out by questioners.

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[5]These eight topics need to be thought about in concert.

Component 2. **Needs Assessment Procedures**

Total involvement of the Core Committee requires that they be well organized into functioning work groups that are efficient and productive. Specific sub-committees should be created and assigned responsibilities by the Core Committee. While sub-committees may contain some personnel who are not members of the Core Committee, each sub-committee should be chaired by a member of the Core Committee so there will be direct communication between the two. Examples of specific sub-committee assignments might include:

1. Student survey development
2. Teacher/staff survey development
3. Administrative survey development

Responsibilities of specific sub-committees must be carefully outlined so that supervision and direction can be provided by the Core Committee. Decisions on work areas, time allotments, resources and personnel required, plus routine administrative decisions must be made. Sub-committee size may vary depending on task. Functions of specific sub-committees would be:

1. Gathering data
2. Administering the instrument(s)
3. Tallying and interpreting the data
4. Reporting results to the Core Committee

Component 3. **Felt Needs Instruments**

A common method of identifying need perceptions is through surveys. Questions on surveys can be geared to elicit opinions on existing conditions, areas of need and (to a limited extent) desired conditions. The concerns of each target group must appear directly on the instrument or room for open-ended responses must be provided so that unanticipated concerns can be recorded. If your system has already adopted goal statements, consider including these on your initial instruments for people to indicate whether they are being accomplished. Also consider including items that reflect recent issues of public concern. Point 4, which follows, provides an example of what items on an instrument might look like and illustrates a means to record unique or unexpected possibilities. Three instruments are provided in the **Resource Guide** (Part 3) for possible adoption by your system: one each for administrators, teachers and students. These measures have been selected because they address typical areas of educational deficiency. The administrative instrument includes statements (or items) about students, staff, curriculum and organization; the teacher instrument covers students, curriculum, self, and administration; the student survey includes statements about environment, curriculum and self.

Component 4. **Survey Formats**

A suggested three part format for creating a survey instrument is illustrated below. This format is the same as the three surveys contained in the **Resource Guide** (Part 3). The format consists of a statement to be rated and two rating scales (degree of importance of that statement of concern and the degree to which the system is currently meeting that concern).

Table 1

Instrument Format (Example from Teacher Survey)

DIRECTIONS: Below are statements of educational concern to be rated by teachers. To the left of each statement you are to indicate how important, in your opinion, it is for that statement to be achieved by students in your school by circling the number corresponding to your opinion. To the right of the statement indicate your opinion of the degree to which students in your district have met or are achieving this statement.

Degree of Importance						Degree Met				
Of no importance	Of minor importance	Of medium importance	Of major importance	Of critical importance	STATEMENTS	Being met to a very low degree	Being met to a low degree	Being met to an average degree	Being met to a high degree	Being met to a very high degree
1	2	3	4	5	STUDENTS HAVE A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD SCHOOL AND LEARNING	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	STUDENTS READ WELL FOR AGE AND GRADE LEVEL	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	STUDENTS WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS	1	2	3	4	5

Instrument statements can come from district goals and concerns or from other available instruments. As mentioned above, the **Resource Guide** presents three such instruments which can be used, plus additional instruments which can be modified. Remember, however, that

1. Each instrument statement should deal with only one activity. For example, do not combine basic skills in math and attitudes toward learning in a single statement.

2. Each instrument statement should be as brief as possible.

3. The use of ambiguous terms and phrases should be avoided.

4. The positioning of statements on the instrument should be determined somewhat randomly. For example, if there are three statements related to mathematics, these should not be listed together, but should be separated from each other.

5. The number of statements used on the survey instrument should not be more than fifty.

6. Statements on an instrument for one target group can be used on another target group's instrument for comparative purposes (if appropriate).

7. Scoring directions should be explicit.

There is always the concern, when adopting a complete instrument from an outside source, as to whether it will be comprehensive enough and accurately cover the concerns of your specific system. Therefore, prior to adopting these felt needs instruments it is recommended that the following activity be conducted before the felt needs instruments are administered. Ask each target group to respond to a typical "open-ended" questionnaire similar to the one presented in Table 2, then include any of their concerns on the felt needs instrument if it is not already on that instrument, thus making the felt needs instrument more pertinent to your specific system. For example, if a common response to item 3 of Table 2 was "Drug Abuse" and the group ranked "Drug Abuse" as one of the five high need areas, then a statement such as "STUDENTS ARE ABLE TO COPE WITH DRUG ABUSE PROBLEMS" could be added to the administration instrument (and perhaps to other instruments as well).

Table 2

Samples of Open Ended Statements

1. More emphasis should be placed on instruction in: _____

_____

2. Less emphasis should be placed on instruction in: _____

_____

3. Major problems facing the community and the school are: _____

_____

4. The responsibility of the school to teach moral and ethical values is:

_____

5. Job or career skills should be learned through: _____

_____

6. The student guidance—counseling program should: _____

_____

7. The educational needs of minority groups can best be solved by: _____

_____

8. Educational opportunities for adults in the community should: _____

_____

9. Student activity and athletic programs should: _____

_____

10. The school's responsibility in the solution of community problems is:

_____

Component 5. **Analysis Design/Scoring Plan**

A data analysis plan may specify several things:

1. How the instruments will be scored.
2. How the top 5-10 priorities for each target group will be determined.
3. How target group lists will be merged and total group priorities determined.
4. How data will be summarized and reported.

The first two tasks listed above can be achieved in one operation. The form of the questionnaire recommended in Table 1 implies the development of "discrepancy" scores (the difference between the degree to which a statement is considered important and the degree to which it is being met). To tabulate the scores you should:

1. For each statement, add the "Degree of Importance" scores by group.
2. Determine the mean importance score.
3. For each statement, add the "Degree Met" scores by group.
4. Determine the mean achievement score.

To compute a discrepancy score for a statement simply subtract the "Degree Met" mean score for each item from the "Degree of Importance" mean score for the item. The result is the mean discrepancy score for that item. There are three possibilities for each item for each group:

1. When I (importance) – M (met) = + (is positive) the statement is important, but not being satisfactorily achieved.
2. When I – M = O (is approximately equal) the statement is being achieved at about its level of importance.
3. When I – M= – (is negative) the statement may be receiving too much attention.

Table 3 illustrates how such a collection of scores might look using the example from Table 1 (assuming that all three groups were asked roughly the same three questions).

Table 3

Table of Mean Discrepancy Scores

	Students	Teachers	Administration
1. Students have a positive attitude toward school and learning.	1.15	1.65	0.01
2. Students read well for age and grade level.	-0.96	1.89	1.00
3. Students work effectively with individuals and groups.	1.12	0.35	-0.95

Statements presented to all three groups simultaneously can be easily placed in priority order from the highest positive scores to the lowest negative scores. In this case the students' perceptions would rank 1, 3 and 2, teachers 2, 1 and 3 and administration, 2, 1 and 3 also. But not all statements will appear on all group measures (lists). For recommendations on how group lists can be merged and put into priority order for a system-wide list, see Task 3 of Step 4, below.

Summarizing findings and reporting these will vary with the committee's intent and purpose. For planning purposes at this point it might be decided that the core committee will be the only group needing the total picture in order to develop a system-wide needs questionnaire. It might be good public relations, however, to deliver a brief summary of this picture (narrative and chart) to each of the participating groups.

Component 6. **Sampling**

The core committee must decide on the number of persons who should be asked to respond to each of the resulting survey instruments. Even if it were possible, it is not necessary to obtain responses from every eligible person in the three groups mentioned. Thus, unless the total district enrollment is very small (less than 1,000 students in K-12), it is advisable to select a sample of persons within each group. But sampling does not mean that the instrument should be given only to, say, teachers who serve on a school advisory council or to a group of administrators who meet regularly for a noon luncheon. While input from such groups might be desirable, perceptions of educational needs held by these groups would not necessarily be representative of members of their group. Probably the best sampling strategy would be to use randomly selected individuals to be surveyed. This should assure a representative group.

In a district with 350 high school students, it would be possible to have every high school student respond to the questionnaire with no special sampling strategy for students being required. However, in a district with 1,000 or more high school students, use of a sampling strategy is recommended since this would minimize costs and reduce the work involved in analyzing the data. In determining the sample, the first questions to ask are, "Who must be sampled," "What size sample is sufficient for this survey" and "What is the expected rate of return." Also, decide whether or not to divide the total population into several subpopulations. For instance, if data is to be collected on the attitudes of students toward a particular school program, students may be divided into several categories:

1. Student participants vs. non-participants.
2. Students in one ethnic group vs. those in another.
3. Students at one grade level vs. students at another.

Thus, each group is treated as a subpopulation and a separate sample would be drawn from each of the subgroups. Keep in mind that the use of subpopulations requires a larger total sample size than that needed if the population were not broken down into smaller units.

Table 4 will help to determine the minimum percentage needed to sample various populations or subpopulations. Of course, higher percentages than the minimum percentages indicated can be used to insure an adequate return.

Table 4

Sampling Sizes

Population Size (Number of Subjects)	Minimum Percentage for Sampling
99 or less	100%
100 - 129	63%
130 - 179	50%
180 - 239	40%
240 - 299	32%
300 - 449	25%
450 - 599	20%
600 - 899	16%
900 - 1,349	13%
1,350 - 1,799	10%
1,800 - 2,249	8%
2,250 - 2,699	6%
2,700 and up	5%

Once the sample size to be drawn from the population or subpopulation has been decided, the individuals comprising the sample can be identified. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. The simplest and most commonly used involves assigning a number to each subject in an alphabetical list (or other unbiased list) of the population or subpopulation beginning with number 1. From this list draw the sample based on the percentage selected. For example, if the population consists of 350 teachers and the decision is to sample 25% (as per Table 4) then choose every fourth person on the list. In a district with, say, 10,000 high school students, a more workable sampling strategy would be to select randomly high school homerooms and have all the students in those homerooms complete the instrument. For example, suppose that in the district with 10,000 high school students there are 400 homerooms. A sample of approximately 500 students could be selected by randomly identifying 20 homerooms and including in the sample every student in each of these homerooms. The method of selecting students by first selecting homerooms should not be used unless students are somewhat randomly assigned to homerooms.

Component 7. **Data Processing**

It is important that the *total* needs assessment team work with the data and that they do so as soon as it is collected. If the team is to work on need solutions, then they must have a good feel for the data and do so before it becomes stale.

Depending upon the type, amount, and purpose of the data collected, data processing can be a simple or time consuming process. In either case, pre-planning is essential. Processing will, in some cases, require the tallying of figures and reporting of totals. In other instances it will require coding for computer or hand analysis. All of this should be predetermined before the study is conducted and, where necessary, qualified assistance should be acquired.

Critical factors like time, space to accommodate working staff (if manual processing is considered), costs, confidentiality of data, objectivity of evaluators, and scope of operations (the number of participants, number of instruments to be processed, etc.) all will affect the decision of which data processing technique to use. Processing open-ended data requires good formats (i.e., meaningful categories for analysis) and speedy analysis. Be sure respondent categories and sub-categories are pre-determined and that a color or numerical code is placed on the instruments for later identification.

Component 8. **Timelines**

The pre-plan should be written out with exact details and a timeline included. It is **critical** that the plans for the project are not on a scattered, informal set of notes or stored in the coordinator's memory. If the plan is in the form of a formal report, everyone knows what is going to happen, when, how and to whom. A sample Pre-Plan is presented in the **Resource Guide** (Part 4). Once the plan is written, present it for formal approval to the superintendent. If any part is not approved, go back, rewrite and re-submit it. Do not proceed with the project if approval is withheld or vague. Time and money is wasted if it is not clearly an official activity.

Establishing a series of target dates is critical. The time taken for needs assessment will vary depending on school system and desired depth; however, it is generally agreed that most systems in Georgia need at least three months but not more than a year to complete a needs assessment. The **Resource Guide** contains a list of items which can be included in the timeline (Part 4). Sub-committee time estimates and projected completion dates should also be included on this common calendar of target activities. The time of the year each activity is to be engaged in must be carefully noted. The question, "What if it takes longer than anticipated," should be fully explored. The timeline can be presented to the superintendent to assure him of the committee's intentions to keep him posted and remain on target. Regular progress reports need to be planned so that each sub-committee and the superintendent can be kept informed as to progress and accomplishments. The chairperson has the responsibility of seeing that this takes place.

step 2

Step 2 - Conduct Perceived Needs Assessment

During this step, school publics are surveyed to determine what they view as the most important school needs. It is recommended that the publics surveyed include administrators, teachers, and students; that the administrative instrument include questions about students, staff, curriculum and organization; that the teacher instrument cover at least students, curriculum, self and administration; that the student survey cover at least environment, curriculum and self; and that approximately five top needs for each group be identified and merged into one system-wide list (a list of about 15 perceived needs).

☐ **Task 1: Review/finalize the perceived needs assessment process**

The **Resource Guide** (Part 3) provides one set of felt needs assessment instruments that covers students, staff and administration. If these instruments are to be used, review **Task 3 Make Tentative Plans** of the previous step. Statements can be added, revised or deleted from these measures. A wider range of views can be obtained by including other target groups during this step. While Task 3 of the previous step required the identification of tentative measures and target groups, this task requires that instruments be finalized, sample sizes and target individuals be specified, administrative procedures detailed, points to be made to each target group defined so as to elicit their cooperation and commitment to the task, and the mechanics of data analysis be finalized. The resource person can help to complete this refinement process, or outside assistance in reviewing the plan can be obtained. Questions that need to be resolved during this process include

1. Should a computer be used to store and retrieve data?
2. What procedures should be used to determine priorities and/or merge lists?
3. What should be looked at system-wide, what by school or subject?
4. What, if any, sub-target group views should be analyzed?
5. Are all directions clear for administering the instruments?
6. Will respondents regard their contribution as meaningful if surveys are filled out in mass?

Field testing the instruments during this task might be helpful to insure that the desired information will be gathered and that respondents understand the assessment process and directions. Remember, the items for the system-wide survey instrument to be described in Step 4, **Determine System-Wide Need Priorities**, will emerge from the responses to the instruments developed during this step.

In defining the points to be made to each target group remember:

1. It is important that everyone be made aware of the process in which he or she will be engaged as well as the potential outcomes.
2. An explanation of how important each person's response is should be a major point.
3. Opportunity for recommendations should be included in the format (e.g., the open-ended statements).
4. A statement of commitment from the target group could help insure that they do not feel like something is being done to them, but that they are part of an internally generated self-renewal effort.
5. Be sure the points to be made are delivered both verbally and in written form.
6. A letter of credibility from the Superintendent might be beneficial.

☐ **Task 2: Conduct the perceived needs assessment**

The major aspects of this task are duplicating the instruments, proofing them carefully, making sure enough room is available for unanticipated responses, setting the climate and orienting target individuals, and seeking to obtain their commitment. While much of this may be done in group meetings, timing and follow-up are critical. It is recommended that the open-ended response form (described in Task 3 of the previous step) be administered first, as specified, and that any high priority needs not already on the questionnaires be added immediately after a group consideration of them. Need statements emerging from the group's consideration of "open-ended" responses can be penned onto the survey instrument immediately by participants (followed by the completion of the instrument), or a revised instrument can be completed later at a second meeting or by mail.

Members of the assessment team will need skills in data gathering. This task may involve the provision of survey administration training emphasizing the purposes of the assessment and the standardization of procedures.

Recommend that respondents complete each item, but do not reject an incomplete survey; merely compute item discrepancy mean scores based on different sample sizes. And do not worry if every survey is not returned. Table 5 contains suggested procedures for administering instruments. The procedures are divided into two categories, administering to individuals as a group (in person) and administering by mail.

Table 5

Instrument Administration

Administering in Person

Before Administering the Instrument

1. Make sure there are enough instruments (and answer sheets if required) for each person sampled. It is good to have a few extra copies on hand in case of errors.

2. Be familiar with the instrument, including all directions. Try to anticipate questions which might be raised.

While Administering The Instrument

1. Advise the subject of any or all of the following as applicable

   a. If responses are to be anonymous (to enable subjects to answer freely), this should be mentioned.

   b. Subjects should read any instructions carefully before answering.

   c. Inform the subjects that clarifications will be made for any instructions or survey items which they do not understand.

   d. Inform the subjects that their responses and comments will provide important information which the school system will use to make decisions and plan improvements. Therefore, it is vital that they answer each question honestly and fully.

   e. Encourage the subjects to complete as many of the open-ended questions as they feel are important and participate in a discussion of their responses.

   f. Urge the subjects to answer every item on the main survey instrument.

2. Administer the main instrument as scheduled.

3. Do not monitor the subjects in such a way that it can be determined how they are answering the questions.

After Administering The Instrument

1. Direct each person to verify that the coded information is complete (e.g. grade level, target group, etc.)

2. Collect all instruments (and answer sheets if used) and place them in a folder on which your name and the group are indicated.

3. Return the completed instruments to the Core Committee Chairperson.

Administering By Mail

Include The Following

1. A cover letter—this has an important role in encouraging valid returns, as well as a high percentage of returns. The following information may be included in such a letter.

   a. General, descriptive title of the survey

   b. Brief description of the purpose of the survey

   c. Directions on how to complete the instrument

   d. Respondent's right of anonymity

   e. A list of endorsements of the study

   f. The name of the sponsor of the study

2. The data collection instrument

3. A self-addressed, stamped envelope

Time Of Conducting The Survey

When to conduct a survey is equally important for the success or failure of acquiring information from people:

1. No survey should take place within two weeks before or one week after a school vacation such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, and Easter.

2. Respondents should have at least a week to complete, but no longer than about eight school days.

Follow-Up Procedures

An organized plan of follow-up may be essential for acquiring a high percentage of returns on a mailed survey instrument. The following procedures are suggested if and only if you received substantially fewer responses than you anticipated or you feel the distribution of those returned may in some way be unrepresentative of the target group.

1. First Follow-Up

   a. A post card reminding the recipient that some instruments have not been received and if his or hers was one, would he or she please return it as soon as possible.

   b. This post card would be mailed approximately two days after the date due.

2. **Second Follow-Up**

   a. A copy of the original instrument, cover letter, and envelope, mailed under the assumption that the original might have been misplaced. Another option would be a telephone call.

   b. This should take place approximately one week after the follow-up post card.

Task 3: Identify sets of highest priority needs

Survey instruments should be categorized by groups (students, teachers, administrators) or subgroups as they are returned. Once the collection process has been completed, analysis of the responses can begin. This analysis determines by target group the discrepancy between "degree of importance" and "degree met" for each need statement on a survey. If the analysis is being handled by computer, cards can be punched directly from the instruments. If use of a computer is not feasible, an organization sheet should prove helpful in performing the analysis. The actual work involved should not be complicated, although it is time consuming.

The results of the tabulation and the analysis will be a discrepancy value[6] of each need statement for every group. This discrepancy value will be an average (mean) discrepancy score for the statement across the whole target group and will indicate the difference between "importance" and "achievement" of that need statement for that target group. **Task 3 (Step 1), Make Tentative Plans,** illustrated a procedure for computing average discrepancy scores per item by target group. The remainder of this task pertains to setting within-group priorities and merging these lists into one list of top system needs. It will be helpful to refer to Table 3 (Step 1, Task 3) during the merger process (and useful as a reporting tool) if there are items common to all three surveys.

Merger of group needs into one combined list can be accomplished by following these guidelines:

1. Items which appear on more than one instrument and also appear on more than one group's top needs list may be included on the merged list.
2. Statements which have unusually high discrepancy scores (scores that immediately stand out from the other scores) as rated by any one group or subgroup can be included.
3. The remaining top three needs from any of the three groups probably should be included.
4. Any other statements with a high discrepancy score (from any list) can be included on the merged list should the full Core Committee or superintendent so desire.

This merger process does not require that a priority order be determined for this list, only that a reasonable means be used to identify about 15-18 *top* system concerns (but not necessarily cross-system concerns at this stage). Merging the need statements into one list can be accomplished not only by comparing top ranked statements among the three groups but also by combining need statements that are both related to each other and rated fairly high (within one instrument or from several instruments). Also judge whether there are any statements that are too specific to be considered in a cross-system assessment.

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[6]Sometimes referred to as a discrepancy score or index.

While the committee can select need statements anywhere from the lists, the top three or four needs identified by each target group will probably appear on the final list. Judgement and flexibility are in order, and more needs may be chosen from one list than another. Then too, perhaps sub-group rankings will be an important consideration in the selection of statements to include on the merged list. If, for example, a subgroup has a very special need, that need may be selected even if the target group as a whole did not have it ranked as one of the top 3-4 needs. To do so will require additional data summaries however. Preparation of a table such as Table 6 may be helpful.

Table 6

Sub-Group Need Statement Rankings

Need Statement	Sub-Group Ranking				
	Group White Students (N = 200)	Rank	Group Black Students (N = 50)	Rank	Total Group Rank
1. Students have a positive attitude toward school and learning.	1.31	(1)	1.00	(2)	1.15 (1)
2. Students read well for age and grade level.	0.91	(3)	1.01	(1)	.96 (3)
3. Students work effectively with individuals and group.	1.30	(2)	.95	(3)	1.12 (2)
4. etc.	-1.01	(4)	-1.09	(4)	-1.05 (4)
5. etc.	-1.10	(5)	-1.40	(5)	-1.25 (5)

Suppose for instance, several statements from the student questionnaire had already been selected to be on the system-wide list and the committee wanted to choose two more from the student list; statements 1 and 2 instead of 1 and 3 might be chosen from the statements illustrated in Table 6 (assuming these items had not already made the merged list) because the second statement represents the highest priority for a significant sub-group.

step 3

Step 3 - Verify Perceived Needs

The aim of Step 3 is the verification of each of the top perceived needs to determine that a problem, limitation, or discrepancy (need) does in fact exist as supported by additional sources of information or hard data. Do test data, structured observations, interview data, or other means (existing or new), bear out the perceived needs identified on the merged list?

Task 1: Plan for verification

To this point, the core committee has collected felt needs from students, teachers and administration. The probability is high that most of these will, in fact, turn out to be the most critical needs of a school system. However, it is possible that the sample group has missed an important need. The selected questionnaires may have missed an important need area for the particular system or the opportunity for adding additional areas may not have drawn out a need or two which ought to be given further consideration. In addition, the next two steps, **Selecting System-wide Priorities** and **Choosing Needs To Be Addressed By Improvement Efforts**, will be more likely to gain a broader base of support if the final choices are supported with verification by additional groups and the development of hard data[7] where possible. Verified needs, then, are simply needs backed up by other relevant data gathered about current conditions in the school. They generate, temper, and give validity to felt needs.

[7]For example, achievement results, competency indicators, etc.

This task basically involves deciding how much objective verification the committee is able and willing to do. It is essentially a gross verification of the perceived list produced via Step 2, **Conduct Perceived Needs Assessment**, through matching performance (or actual status) against perception. There are two planning tasks necessary to prepare for the verification of felt needs:

1. Set desired levels of achievement (performance) for each of the high priority needs.

2. Select verification tools or techniques.

The first planning task involves examining each of the 15-18 top perceived needs from the three groups surveyed and deciding to what level that need should be achieved and what *kinds* of information or data would logically indicate a particular level of achievement. For example, if one of the identified needs is reading improvement, the committee might specify the level of reading proficiency at the grade level(s) to be improved that would be acceptable. Perhaps present and desirable levels of achievement could be specified in terms of standardized test scores. If the need is in a more subjective area like student or teacher attitudes toward school, describe the hoped for attitudes and how to measure them. Perhaps an attitude inventory, spot interviews or group discussion would verify these needs. Some sources which might help in setting desired levels of performance or achievement of particular needs might include

1. National or state norms.

2. Achievement levels in the district or similar districts.

3. Achievement of specified performance objectives (criterion-referenced).

4. Desired behaviors in non-cognitive areas.

5. Work skills desirable in the surrounding community.

In developing standards there are several important points to consider:

1. Base the standard on reasonable expectations of achievement. (Should all students achieve at 90th percentile?)

2. Base the standard on a logical relationship between present performance and future situations. (If you decide that a 5th grade reading level is necessary to do high school work, don't set the standard for entering freshmen at the 7th grade level.)

3. Write standards so they can be easily measured. Avoid such terms as "do better" and "understand."

4. Set the standard before making the measurement.

In selecting verification tools and techniques the committee will be guided by the type and level of expected achievement. Three variables to consider at this point are outlined below.

A. Need Type — Under what group(s) or area(s) of the school environment does the need fall?

1. Student	4. Curriculum
2. Staff	5. Resources
3. Administration	6. Community

B. Need Category — Does the need refer to performance in the realm of

1. Cognitive
2. Affective
3. Psycho-motor

Every need type may not, of course, include reference to all three categories.

C. Verification Technique — Can the type and category be analyzed by way of

1. Tests (standardized, criterion referenced or locally developed)
2. Questionnaires (formally validated or local)
3. Observations (formal observation schedules or informal spot observations)
4. Interviews (formal interview schedules or informal sample interviews, individual or group)
5. Examination of other sources of data (demographic, statistical, school studies, previous needs assessments, etc.)

Consideration of Points A, B and C will help insure choosing techniques which fit both the need type and need category. It will also help in beginning to think about the multiple aspects influencing a need.

All of these sources of data are available to most school systems or can be readily developed, especially if an outside consultant is assisting the efforts. Existing data should be used as much as possible but complemented when possible by other adopted or developed measurements, tools and techniques.

During this task the committee is oriented to possible verification tools — existing and new. The committee then selects procedures or tools to verify the listed needs. Outside assessment help will be quite useful during this stage (CESA, University, State Department).

☐ **Task 2: Validate the perceived needs**

The actual collection of data will be a major logistical task for the needs assessment committee. While each member can be responsible for certain areas, the actual administration of a measure probably would be done best by representatives of the group to which the measure will be administered. This is also a good chance to involve many people from the school and community.

Once all the data have been collected and compiled, the committee can eliminate perceived needs that are not verified by the data or may add new needs identified through the analysis.[8] Most of the needs will probably remain following this "weeding out" process. There are no hard-and-fast standards for retaining or rejecting a need. But there are some criteria which can guide such determination. These include:

1. Standardized, comparative results — Where does the system stand in relation to other school systems in your area, in your state?
2. Within measure variances — Are there some areas measured by a particular instrument which are obviously weaker than other areas measured by the same instrument?
3. Minimal criterion levels — Has the school system set minimal levels of achievement, growth or change which have not been met?
4. "Gut" reactions — Do the scores revealed by a specific instrument stand out as being low, poor or "out of whack"?
5. Professional opinions — Have consultants mentioned that certain scores are low, skills lacking, or attitudes negative?
6. Performance on the job — Does limited performance on the job or in some setting coincide with school-collected data?

The committee should now determine whether any of the needs should be re-ranked in light of the assessment of the schools' performance. This is also the time to re-word any needs in a way which might clarify the need or make it more inclusive of the insights gained during verification.

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[8]This step requires looking at the need from a different vantage point; perhaps in a more in-depth way. It may be that the perceived need being examined is really not the need at all, but merely related to it or camouflaged by it. Or perhaps some sub-factor of the identified need is the root of the problem. At this point it may be necessary to re-state the need or develop a new one. In any case, a subsequent step, **Causal Analysis**, will provide additional means to examine a need in greater depth. Do not spend too much time during this step on any one need, even if some of the underlying causes of the need are becoming clear.

step 4

Step 4 - Determine System-Wide Need Priorities

One cross-system survey instrument is developed and administered to all target audiences during Step 4. Again a discrepancy-type instrument is suggested for surveying everyone's perception of the importance of addressing a need and the degree to which this need has been met to date. A system-wide list in priority order can then be generated.

☐ **Task 1: Organize for a system-wide ranking of needs**

Now that the master list of perceived needs has been verified and/or refined, this list can be used as the basis for an instrument to be used cross-system. This instrument will be responded to by persons not only from the original target groups, but also by others who might not have been previously surveyed (e.g. parents, Board members). A prototype of such an instrument can not be presented here for adoption because it must be made up of statements obtained from each system's list. This instrument, however, can have exactly the same format as the three instruments provided in the **Resource Guide**. Thus, such a survey would reflect everyone's perception of (1) the importance of addressing a particular need and (2) the degree to which that need has been met to date. Procedures for administering the survey and determining a priority order of resulting needs are discussed under the next two tasks.

Task 2: Conduct the assessment

Conducting this part of the assessment is typically a simple step; the survey is distributed and collected, probably by mail. Be especially concerned during this task about sampling techniques and getting a representative cross-section of each target group. It is recommended that as large a sample as possible be polled, given resources. Surveys should go to as many students, teachers, parents and community members as possible. All of the professional central office staff, principals and board of education members should be surveyed. The goal is to be confident that the resulting priority list of system needs is representative of the largest possible population. This will help (1) involve more individuals in the system improvement process and (2) add strength and validity to the final recommendations.

Review the procedures referred to under Tasks 2 and 3 of Step 2 for tips on administering this instrument. It is relatively simple to tally information from rating-scale instruments because responses are given in the form of numbers. If data analysis is to be performed manually, a form should be devised with all tallies kept on the form. If computer analysis is to be employed, special coding forms may be utilized in collecting the data. Be sure to receive authorative advice if this is the case.

Task 3: Place system-wide needs in priority order

When a needs assessment has been completed and a list of critical needs has been compiled, it is usually impossible for the local school system to attempt to meet all the identified needs at the same time. Therefore, it is essential that a priority for needs be established. While there is no magic formula for determining top priority needs, one procedure which has merit will be discussed based on the illustration in Table 7 and 8 below.

First, tabulate a mean discrepancy score for each item by group as described in Step 1, Task 3. Need statements may then be rank ordered from high to low for each group as illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7

Need Statement Rankings Per Target Group

Need Statement	Students	Teachers	Principals	Central Offices	Board	Parents	Other Community
1.	1	3	1	1	1	2	3
2.	3	2	3	2	2	3	4
3.	2	1	4	3	3	1	1
4.	4	4	5	5	4	5	2
5.	5	5	2	4	5	4	5

Here we have a typical situation; the students, principals, central office and board all rank item one as first and the teachers, parents and community rank it second or third. How can such needs be put in priority order across the total group? The **Resource Guide** (Part 5) contains six suggestions for determining a total sample priority order. The most often used approach is

to employ a system of *weighted* discrepancy scores for each item. That is, determine which of the groups would be most qualified to make such an assessment and which groups would be most influential in assuring success on that item should it be selected as the target for improvement. There are three possibilities at this point:

a. The same weight for all groups for all items (actually a no-weight decision).

b. Different weights for some groups on *each* item.

c. Different weights for some groups on *all* items.

Experience suggests that alternative "b" is preferred over "a" and "c"

The rationale for different weights per group per item is based on the assumption that the importance of one item might be better judged by, say, group 1 than group 2, while the next item is better judged by group 2.

This may very well be one of the most difficult and important judgements to be addressed by the committee, but one that must be resolved in a way which will, as well as possible, assure that all groups in the educational community are fairly represented and that the support of all these groups is retained for the final decision on an improvement effort.

To merge group priority lists into one overall list, simply multiply each item discrepancy score by the group weight, add up group weighted scores for each item and divide by the total weights (n). Table 8 illustrates this computational process for two items.

Note also that this procedure eliminates problems caused by sample size; for example, a survey administered to 500 students and 5 administrators.

Table 8

Sample Weighting System

	Item 1					Item 2				
	Weight		Discrepancy Score		Weighted Discrepancy Score	Weight		Discrepancy Score		Weighted Discrepancy Score
Students	2	x	1.15	=	2.30	1	x	-0.96	=	-0.96
Teachers	2	x	1.65	=	3.30	3	x	1.89	=	5.67
Principals	2	x	0.01	=	0.02	2	x	1.00	=	2.00
Central Offices	1	x	0.41	=	0.41	1	x	1.09	=	1.09
Board	1	x	1.01	=	1.01	2	x	2.31	=	4.62
Parents	2	x	1.44	=	2.88	2	x	-0.05	=	-0.10
Other Community	1	x	-0.03	=	-0.03	1	x	1.98	=	1.98
	n=11		Total	=	9.89	n=12		Total	=	14.30
	9.98 ÷ 11 = 0.899 - Weighted Discrepancy Value					14.30 ÷ 12 = 1.191 - Weighted Discrepancy Value				

After obtaining a weighted discrepancy score for each item statement (or need), these scores are ranked from high to low, resulting in a system-wide priority list of perceived needs. In the example in Table 8, item 2 has the highest priority and would be listed before item 1.[9] *Weights should be assigned before the collection of the actual data.*

This step concludes with publicizing the complete list of ranked system-wide needs. While this involves publishing the list and preparing a brief summary of how the list was derived, it does not require dissemination of a full report at this time. A brief summary can be prepared to include information about assessment procedures[10] and separate analyses by target groups or sub-groups. Ideas on methods of informing the community are presented in the last step of this document and some of these may be useful in this and other dissemination-related tasks.

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[9]Other methods for ranking need statements are illustrated in the **Resource Guide** (Part 5).

[10]Needs Assessment Procedures

a. How was it done?
b. When was it done?
c. Who was involved?
d. What priorities were established?
e. How were perceptions verified by performance?

step 5

Step 5 - Choose Need(s) To Be Addressed By Improvement Efforts

Step 5 involves deciding which of the priority needs are to be the focus of improvement. It is recommended that one or two closely related needs be identified after careful consideration of the area needing improvement and the resources available.

Task 1: Determine which need(s) is to be improved

The school system has now worked through a systematic planning process for educational improvement to the point of setting priorities. The needs assessment may have revealed quite a list of needs. There may be many things that need to be done. But are the time and resources available to undertake them all at this time? With the interpretation of data and identification of needs it becomes necessary to decide which needs should be chosen for action. It may be evident that the highest priority needs are not susceptible to early solution, taking into account existing resources or other constraints. Therefore, other criteria must be considered. There are several factors which have a decided bearing on this selection process:

1. Given the limited amount of funding available, for which of these needs do we already have the most resources? For example, if there is already a reading staff which is adequate, but a more relevant reading program is needed, that priority might be chosen over a need for which there are no resources at all.

2. Utilize the data, but do not be dominated by it. It would be foolish to do nothing about several attainable needs at second and third priority because of the cost of one "high priority" need. But if the need is so critical that everything else depends on its solution, contact support agencies to help overcome factors such as cost—that's a large part of their job.

3. If the resources, including personnel and facilities, are not available, what would be the cost of securing the necessary resources? Compare the need for developing a skill to the cost of obtaining that skill or improving instruction related to that skill.

4. Can the deficit be removed through a low-cost workshop, or the use of a simple job aid, or will extensive training materials and time be required?

5. Decide if the identified need is a district-wide one. The results of the needs assessment ought to be felt as widely as possible.

6. Arrange the needs statements by categories. Some suggested categories are subject area, cognitive, affective, psychomotor, or number of schools reporting the need. It may be possible to maximize resources by addressing only needs in a major category.

7. Reconcile discrepancies among points of view of different groups about a particular need. The footnote below illustrates such an example.[11]

All needs are, in a sense, in competition with each other when the time comes to allocate finite resources to programs.

Select a manageable number of needs to address; one or two will be plenty. Or, it may be more reasonable to address parts of several needs. Go down the system-wide priority list of perceived needs and ask:

1. Do you have, or can you get, all the resources necessary to do this?

2. Which is best for the system in light of policies, climate and morale?

3. Where will the remediation be most effective?

4. Is the change supported by those who will deliver or those affected?

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[11]Two men were walking down the street and both spied simultaneously a rather large man. The two men turned to each other and the first said, "Look at that fat man; he needs to go on a diet." The second man replied, "He is fat all right, but what he really needs is to jog!" The two men next went to talk to the subject of their discussion and said, "Hi, how do you feel?" The large man replied, "Well, not so good." The two men reveled for a moment in the excellent diagnosis and prescriptions. The large man continued, "I am the world champion weight lifter, and I have to put on about 20 or 30 pounds so that I can press the amount of weight that it will take to win the next world competition. I won't feel really good until the extra weight is on me and I then know I can win the championship again!"

As can be seen, our two needs assessors saw a discrepancy and immediately assessed it in terms of process (diet, jog). They would have been much more correct in their diagnosis had the end results (behavior—weight lifting achievement) been uppermost in their minds.

5. Do you want to do it?

Consider the following factors in answering the above questions:

1. Is it content area/non-content area centered?
2. Is it student/staff centered?
3. Is it direct instruction or support centered?
4. Is it centered at a particular school(s) or cross-system based?
5. Is it centered at a grade level(s) or K-12 related?
6. Is it short-ranged or future oriented?

☐ **Task 2: Obtain School System Approval**

Perhaps the best way to obtain school system approval is to proceed through the same channels that were used originally to set up the needs assessment and/or planning committees. If the superintendent appointed the committee directly, go to him first for approval. He can then decide how to approach the school board. If a faculty, principal or other central staff body selected the committee, go to them first. If the needs assessment committee is a subcommittee of a steering or planning committee, go the parent body. The two rules for attaining approval are (1) don't by-pass anyone instrumental in the initial stages of the needs assessment and (2) be sure to obtain written approval from the school board. Help from them may be necessary to obtain additional resources. Obtaining superintendent and Board approval is important for several other reasons. First of all, they are the decision-makers. The committee's job is to present the needs assessment data as clearly and as accurately as possible. Secondly, formal adoption by the school board will give the kind of clout needed to engage in **Step 6, "Causal Analysis of the Selected Need(s)."** Finally, the superintendent and/or Board may be privy to special information or may identify underlying factors the committee had not considered. For example, suppose the data showed the highest priority need to be reading in the upper grades (because the data showed the greatest discrepancy there). Further suppose that the core committee identified secondary reading as the area of greatest urgency under the assumption that these students are soon to graduate (or drop out) from high school and need to be brought up in reading proficiency before it is too late (or because a major educational goal of the system is to place into society young women and men who can read well enough to function). But the superintendent may have some other opinions based on the different data. He or she might reason that if students are getting to the upper grades with poor reading skills, something is wrong at the lower levels, and it is there that the problem must be attacked and extra money spent. He/she might make an assumption which says, in effect, there are developmental phases in the growth of children and sequences in the learning of reading; if we are going to teach them to read well, we have to do the proper things at the proper age. Both are good arguments. The point is, however, that neither decision is a direct application of the data alone. Each involves a process that includes other assumptions and logic not contained in the needs assessment information itself. The superintendent will also be concerned with how the need relates to other on-going activities for which he or she is responsible. For example, if the superintendent has recently undertaken responsibility for developing system goals, he or she may ask, "How do the needs relate to our educational goals" or "Is it realistic, feasible, or desirable?"

Revise the needs list, if necessary, because of the superintendent's or Board's input. If their feedback runs counter to the data, it may be wise to spend extra time with them explaining the procedures used to generate the needs list. Presentation of the committee's report to the superintendent and/or Board would usually be attended by the total team in order to support fully

the material presented. The Board may even wish to hold a public hearing prior to adoption. Finally, try to write down significant positive thoughts or quotes that the superintendent or Board members might have expressed during the approval process, demonstrating positive expressions of support or direction. Such quotes will help with the next task.

☐ **Task 3: Communicate findings/undertakings to the public**

The committee needs public support, particularly from the educational community, in conducting Step 6, determining probable causes of the need. During Step 6, it will be important to involve as large a representative cross-section of those who will be affected by the improvement as is feasible given the size and complexity of the system. Therefore, communication at this point is vital. First, decide on the points to be made to various publics (students, staff, the community). A report during this step might contain any or all of the following:

1. A brief synopsis of procedures and activities
2. Relevant statistics (number of people involved, number of needs generated, number of meetings held, etc.)
3. Specific recommendations concerning those needs to be addressed through improvement and a rationale for their selection
4. Support statements of the superintendent or board members
5. Future happenings (What's next, how it will occur).

Make presentations within the system first — to staff and students — then to parents and the community at large. At the very least, inform those groups that participated in the perceived needs assessments. This is a chance to fulfill the committee's commitment that participants will share in the findings. Presentations, conferences, oral reports, mail-outs and news releases constitute typical presentation formats (see the **Resource Guide, Part 6**, for additional formats). Meetings would typically be attended by team members to add additional weight. Meetings might include town meetings, interest group meetings, staff meetings, student assemblies or specially scheduled conferences.

step 6

Conduct a Causal Analysis of the Need(s) to be Improved

In Steps 1-5 the Needs Assessment Committee and the education community were concerned with reaching concensus through perceptions and with objective verification of the highest priority need(s) of the school system. Need statements, as such, however, do not always provide direction for selecting improvement activities. The *causes* of those needs must be specifically isolated. Decision-makers must answer the question, "*Why* does this need exist?" If, for example, the need identified for improvement is "To improve reading skills at the 4-6 level," there is no way to decide just from the statement of the need area what, exactly, should be done in response to the need. That students do not read well in grades 4-6 is only a *symptom* of a more basic problem or problems. While the immediate response may be to assume that a new or improved language arts curriculum is needed for grades 4-6, at this point the system can not be sure that a new curriculum is the best or the only solution. The present language arts program probably already includes an emphasis on reading, but perhaps the necessary resources do not exist to implement the program adequately, or teachers may not have sufficient competencies to carry out the program, or the administrative structure of the schools or management styles of the principals may mitigate against the style of the present curriculum. Any or all of these kinds of factors may be the actual *cause* of the problem. It is essential to identify carefully the *reasons* why a problem exists before the committee will be able to select the most appropriate solution(s) to meet the system's identified need. This is particularly true if a need is stated very broadly.

This step, then, requires an examination of factors which might have caused the need. But it requires an in-depth look at only the need area identified rather than a time consuming examination of the whole school program and operations. In order to initiate such an analysis, six factors are recommended for study in relation to the need: students, teachers, curriculum, resources, management and the community. The purpose of causal analysis is to refine the need with respect to possible causal factors in these areas. It further suggests examining and combining **data, judgements** and **hypotheses.** The results of this step will be the generation of a master list of causes placed in priority order and a report circulated.

Task 1: Organize to Conduct the Causal Analysis

The first organizational task for the coordinator and/or the resource person in causal analysis is to review carefully all elements of the process. The critical importance of causal analysis can not be emphasized too urgently. The most important of the five tasks described here is **Task 2: Analyze the Need in Relation to Six Causal Areas.** Pay special attention to this step — the results at this point will directly impact all improvement efforts from here on.

Causal analysis can be a considerable undertaking. The Core Committee will no doubt want to draft several sub-committees for assistance. As indicated below, there are six areas suggested for examination relative to the specific need. Each of the sub-committees may take responsibility for the analysis of one of these six areas. Each sub-committee should include representatives from each area and persons with special knowledge of or insight into that area. These sub-committees will also need representation from the need area under consideration (i.e. for a need in reading at the middle school, the middle school language arts teachers should be represented). The Core Committee will need to provide a careful orientation to each of the sub-committees as to their charge, the resources available to them and the expected outcomes. Most important, however, will be an orientation to the causal analysis process outlined in Tasks 2-5. Remember that these sub-committees are being asked to conduct a sort of needs assessment within a needs assessment, so they should be made aware of all the skills and insights the Core Committee has gained. Finally, each sub-committee will be chaired by a member of the Core Committee.

Since the causal analysis is a specific examination of all aspects of a particular need, the Core Committee and sub-committees may need some special support to complete their tasks. As an examination of the tasks below will reveal, numerous instruments are likely to be employed. Some that might be chosen will require special expertise in analyzing the results. The State Department, CESA or university should be contacted early to provide suggestions on the use of particular instruments and to aid in data analysis where necessary. In addition, several suggested techniques require special skills in developing observation and interview schedules and administering these tools. Some help in this area may also be needed. Finally, a great deal of data is likely to be generated. At least additional clerical help will be needed to handle this. Perhaps a sub-group of the Core Committee could be assigned coordinating responsiblity for the information generated by the sub-committees.

The final organizational task is to set a timeline for the causal analysis. Because of the nature and scope of causal analysis, this will be a very important task. Since this is such a good opportunity to involve a lot of system and community people and the number of sub-committees is likely to be larger than for any other step in the needs assessment, the Core Committee will have its most complicated coordination task thus far. Without a specific timeline, which includes (1) tasks to be performed, (2) the groups responsible for each task, (3) projected deadlines, (4) expected outcomes and (5) resources needed, the entire causal analysis is likely to get out of hand and decisions might be made with inaccurate or insufficient data.

Task 2: Analyze the Need in Relation to Six Causal Areas

In conducting the causal analysis, it is recommended that the needs assessment committee **decide which of six areas (or sub-areas) that can be affected by improvement efforts might be contributing causes of the problem.** Categorizing potential causes into recognized clusters can help insure that all possible areas of cause are addressed in sufficient detail. Investigation of these areas in relation to the need(s) may require further data collection or analysis or re-analysis of existing school system data. Instruments and questionnaires of a more diagnostic nature than those used in needs identification may be required in order to concentrate on one area of need.

Listed below are the six areas and sub-areas which should be the focus during causal analysis:

1.0. **Students**

- 1.1. Achievement (knowledge, skills)
- 1.2. Attitudes

2.0. **Staff/Teachers**

- 2.1. Knowledge
- 2.2. Skills
- 2.3. Attitudes
- 2.4. Roles/Responsibilities

3.0. **Curriculum**

- 3.1. Goals
- 3.2. Content (Scope, sequence)
- 3.3. Methods
- 3.4. Evaluation

4.0. **Resources**

- 4.1. Curriculum Resources
- 4.2. Materials/Equipment
- 4.3. Special/Auxiliary programs
- 4.4. Physical Plant
- 4.5. Training Assistance

5.0. **Management**

- 5.1. Organization
- 5.2. Knowledge
- 5.3. Skills
- 5.4. Attitudes

6.0. **Community**

- 6.1. Support/Communication
- 6.2. Resources

It may not be necessary to address all of the sub-areas, or even all of the areas, listed above to uncover the major causes of the identified need. Continuing the example of reading, it may be a given from the start that changes in or additions to the physical plants in the system will not be possible, thus eliminating 4.4. right away. The community may have already indicated its support for the improvement of reading skills in the needs assessment, and the present language arts program may be using parent volunteers in the remedial reading program while community members are helping to infuse career education into the language arts units, thus making it likely that the whole "community" area (6.0.) can be eliminated from the analysis. Generally, however, most areas and sub-areas will need some attention.

The next task revolves around exploring how each area and sub-area might affect the need. The task is to *describe the desired conditions in each area.* A useful approach is to define first what would be ideal conditions within each area if the system had the reading program it wanted. For example, just how well should 4-6 graders be able to read? How would the language arts teachers describe a student with a very good attitude toward reading? How would that student act? For the staff, what kinds of knowledge and skills would a very good reading teacher have? What would constitute a positive attitude by teachers toward reading within the language arts curriculum? What instructional strategies seem to be most effective in teaching reading; do our teachers have mastery of these strategies and do they use them? From such exploration

the committee could develop a description of the kind of reading program and learning environment which would be ideal for their particular school system.[12]

From this general description, with the help of system personnel, students and parents, the committee can then formulate **specific** statements, or conditions, for each sub-area. Each of these statements can then be examined in terms of present conditions to indicate whether that idea (or the lack of it) might be identified as a cause of the problem. Once again the committee is faced with the simple discrepancy formula:

$$\text{What you want} - \text{What you have} = \text{What you need}$$

A sample statement (descriptor) for each sub-area may suffice to clarify the process further. Remember, the over-arching question for each area is, "How might this area (students, staff, curriculum, etc.) be affecting our identified need?" Also remember that the following is only an example. Many of the sub-areas will have numerous statements describing the hoped for conditions.

1.0. **Students**

1.1. Achievement

ex. "Our students should perform within ½ year of grade level on word recognition, word attack skills and comprehension."

1.2. Attitudes

ex. "Our students should enjoy reading."

It is obvious that student achievement can not be considered the *cause* of a problem, especially one stated in terms of student achievement. Poor student achievement is, of course, a *symptom* of a more basic problem. Achievement is included in this list, however, because a careful examination of student achievement in the need area may offer a number of clues as to what the root causes are.

Again, students attitudes toward reading fall more into the realm of *symptom* rather than *cause,* but there is a direct relationship between student attitude about a subject and achievement. If student attitudes were generally negative, a project to improve attitudes could then be considered.

2.0. **Staff/Teachers**

2.1. Knowledge

ex. "Our language arts teachers should have command of at least two basic approaches to increasing student reading comprehension."

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[12]This task will obviously require the involvement of many students, teachers, administrators and parents to contribute ideas for the different areas. Where these groups have been asked to contribute to this level of detail, resulting improvement recommendations have gained considerable support — an important opportunity.

2.2. Skills

ex. "Our language arts teachers should be able to demonstrate skills in applying at least two approaches to increasing student reading comprehension."

2.3. Attitudes

ex. "All teachers in our school should see the value in infusing reading into all content areas."

2.4. Roles/Responsibilities

ex. "All teachers in our school should infuse reading into all content areas."

There is impressive research to demonstrate the relationship between staff competencies, attitudes and/or roles and responsibilities and student achievement. It may be that student achievement 4-6 in reading could be enhanced significantly by increasing teachers' knowledge of the field and skills in the classroom and improving attitudes toward the content area, their jobs or their responsibilities.

In 2.1. (knowledge) the committee will need to have a sub-committee develop a hierarchy of information that all teachers ought to have at their command. Skills (2.2.) should then reflect those areas of knowledge. Attitudes would include not only support of the kind of reading program used by the system, but also attitudes about their job situation and toward students. Roles/Responsibilities (2.4.) refers to teacher commitment to the program (responsibilities), the number and kinds of classes and student groups they have to teach, other tasks required of them and how all of these affect teacher performance in the classroom.

3.0. **Curriculum**

3.1. Goals

ex. "We should have a comprehensive set of goals and objectives for reading, complete with goal indicators and behavioral objectives."

3.2. Content

ex. "Our scope and sequence should include all knowledge and skills required of our students 4-6 and be consistent with the reading content K-3 and 7-12."

3.3. Methods

ex. "We want to individualize instruction in our reading program."

3.4. Evaluation

ex. "Our assessment should be consistent with our individualized approach to teaching reading."

A school's staff can be highly skilled, with an abundance of resources and a supportive administration, but if the curriculum does not coincide with student needs, students will not achieve. Here is one example of where it will be important to have collected student achievement data in order to facilitate another area.

If the system or school does not have a comprehensive set of goals and objectives (3.1.), then content (3.2.) may vary widely from class to class and teachers may even work at cross purposes. The scope and sequence (3.2.) is a reflection of the goals; lack of coordination in this area can result in problems such as children who go all the way through grade school and never encounter an important skill directly. To have a consistent program at any level will require a detailed scope and sequence agreed upon and supported by all staff. How teachers teach, methods (3.3.), must, of course, be consistent with the goals and content. It is critical that the three be considered together. All too often teachers agree to adopt new content and try to use old methods which may not be appropriate at all. The same can be said of evaluation (3.4.).

4.0. **Resources**

4.1. Curriculum Resources

ex. "Our resources should be consistent in content and sufficient in quantity to support the individualized program now under consideration."

4.2. Materials and Equipment

note: See 4.1.

4.3. Special/Auxiliary programs

note: It is felt that a comprehensive reading program as described above will not need special or auxiliary programs.

4.4. Physical Plant

note: The present plants are adequate.

4.5. Training Assistance

ex. "Our program should emphasize the concept of continuous progress for teachers as well as students; therefore, continual staff development utilizing outside consultants, where feasible, will be an ongoing part of the language arts program."

Resources, as defined here, has a relatively narrow scope. This is the most quantitative of the categories and can, for the most part, be assessed accordingly. Special programs and training assistance can, however, become qualitative policy issues and must be understood in terms of their long range implications. (Both sub-areas can require considerable funds and personnel should a system commit itself to them.)

5.0. **Management**

5.1. Organization

ex. "Teachers at each grade level should be organized into planning teams with at least one hour per week to plan together and three hours of individual planning time."

5.2. Knowledge

ex. "The principals of each school should clearly understand the system's reading program to the degree that they can offer curricular support to teachers."

5.3. Skills

ex. "To support our reading program, our principals should be able to observe an activity upon request and offer content or organizational recommendations as a result."

5.4. Attitudes

ex. "Our principals should consider themselves the curricular leaders of their schools or support the idea that a lead teacher should be positioned in that role."

Management and leadership are often overlooked, or avoided, as possible causes of problems in student achievement. It is true that this may be one of the most difficult areas to affect. Nevertheless, the direct relationship between the organizational climate of a school, the skills of the principal, and student achievement can not be denied. The organization (5.1.) of the school (the schedule, the way teachers and students are grouped, even the physical arrangements) can have a decided effect on school outcomes and must be considered in the development of any program components. Educators are also realizing more and more the critical importance of the competencies (5.2., 5.3.) of the principal. Not only must he/she be a good administrator, but we must strive to encourage principals who are also the schools' curricular leaders. Finally the attitudes (5.4.) of the principal toward his/her own role and responsibilities, the teachers and students, the curriculum and the tasks of the school all affect achievement directly.

6.0. **Community**

6.1. **Support/Communication**

ex. "Our parents and other community members must be kept informed about the language arts program and be encouraged to participate wherever and whenever possible."

6.2. **Resources**

ex. "The language arts teachers should be aware of the physical and human resources that are available in the school community and use these resources on a regular basis in program planning and implementation."

The major element of the community area which surfaces as a possible causal factor to school problems is lack of support. This usually results from failures in communications and the commitment and willingness on the part of the school and community alike to cooperate. As we all know, the best way to gain commitment and support is by encouraging involvement. Any comprehensive description of a school program must include the community.

Admittedly the task of describing desired conditions in each area is a difficult one which will require the interaction of almost all of the educational community and may involve considerable time and effort. The system, in a way, is developing a model of the solution to a perceived problem. But the **process** itself is invaluable to a system which wants to improve its school outcomes.

Before the committee actually launches into the task of developing a description of the desired conditions, there are a few points to keep in mind:

1. The above examples of descriptors for each area are stated in extreme terms for emphasis. The committee and sub-committees may not be prepared to be that specific at this stage

of the planning process. The group should, however, at least explore each area thoroughly enough to be ready to describe some **alternative** descriptions of conditions (i.e. "We should be doing this . . ." **or** "We should be doing this . . .").

2. Remember that, as work progresses on each area, the descriptions of some of the areas may change. If the work is done by sub-committees, the core committee should agree first on the general direction that is desirable (individualized and/or group instruction? Team planning and teaching and/or self-contained classrooms? Basal readers and/or the "purple" curriculum? etc.). Then the chairpersons of the sub-committees must meet regularly to be sure that they are not working at cross purposes. This description ought to be organic; it should grow as more groups explore the ideas more deeply.

3. Don't limit descriptions only to those that clearly apply to the need at hand (reading). Many descriptors are general by nature; many components will apply to any area of need (i.e. "The principal should be the curricular leader of the school.") These should be included in the description of the ideal setting.

4. There are some areas or sub-areas that the work groups may feel cannot be addressed at this time. Do not hesitate, however, to include these in the description. If this description is comprehensive, it can serve as a guide to improvement for years to come, when conditions may have changed. This suggestion does not contradict the recommendations made on page 35 concerning the physical plant (4.4.) and community (6.0.). In those cases, one (physical plant) was left out because of lack of funds, and the community (6.0.) because everyone could agree that that area was already at an effective level. The present suggestion refers instead to areas that may just be too difficult right now or that present policies or politics may prevent. As mentioned earlier, the judgement of the core committee will be a determining factor.

5. Finally, no one area or sub-area is isolated; they all overlap. They are presented and addressed separately merely to facilitate the process. Stating under methods (3.3.) that instruction should be individualized has obvious impact on all other areas — can teachers be trained in these methods? Can we obtain the new materials which might be required? Can the parents and community be brought around to positive support for this method? For a statement like this one in methods, an additional descriptor will have to be added to all the rest to allow for it.

Since these concerns overlap and/or are interrelated, there may be a need for connecting questions such as: "Does the curriculum reflect community needs?" Such a question can be listed either with the community or with the curriculum concerns. The **Resource Guide** (Part 8) presents additional cross-category questions.

Describing the desired conditions in each area as suggested above can be a considerable undertaking when addressed in a concerted way. This task can be as involved and time consuming as all the other needs assessment tasks combined. Experience has shown that this is a critical step if real need areas are to be identified and practical solutions with the maximum chance of success are to be found. The importance of this task cannot be emphasized too strongly!

Once the committee has chosen which of the six areas to address and developed a description of what the system wants in those areas, it should be ready to **select tools and techniques to collect information on each condition and collect data.** Many conditions which have been described already have, in all probability, one or more tools or instruments designed for assessment. Part 7 of the **Resource Guide** contains numerous examples with references to many more. It is recommended that the committee consider variety. Don't depend solely on paper and

pencil assessment. Include some observation and interviewing on a sample basis where practical. Try to identify some student, staff or curricular products which could demonstrate present conditions in one or more areas, etc. Listed below are some typical analysis techniques for each of the six areas.

Students: Achievement

- Many standardized tests are available.
- The new Georgia Criterion Referenced Tests are an excellent resource.
- Locally developed tests reflecting the system's specific goals and content would be most useful.
- Student records can be examined.
- Examine student products as a reflection of achievement. This approach is especially useful to give the work groups a "feel" for student achievement.

Students: Attitudes

- There are several validated attitude surveys for students which can be adopted whole or in part (see **Resource Guide**), or develop one locally.
- An interview schedule can be developed for use with a sample of students either individually or in groups like homerooms.
- Ask teachers to assign short papers to students about how they feel about school (or language arts, etc.) and why.
- Talk with parents and teachers about their perceptions of student attitudes (or develop a questionnaire).

Staff: Knowledge

- The new State Criterion Referenced Knowledge Test for Beginning Teachers can give information on generic content-field knowledge.
- The National Teachers Exam has sections on content and methods knowledge.
- Administer some of the students' test to teachers (local or standardized).
- Examine teachers' professional records for degrees and courses and note how current they are.

Staff: Skills

- Assessment by data collectors trained in the recently developed Beginning Teacher Assessment Project can provide information on the generic skills of all system or content area teachers.
- A locally developed observation schedule would be useful.
- A self-assessment questionnaire is probably the best, most popular method now being used. There are formally validated ones available (see the **Resource Guide**) or one could be developed locally.

- Interviews with principals and supervisors can often give useful information and insight.

Staff: Attitudes

- A formal or locally developed questionnaire will yield the greatest quantity of information.
- Group or individual interviews can provide a good "feel" for teachers' attitudes. Be sure to structure the interviews carefully to cover all the areas of concern.

Staff: Roles and Responsibilities

- This is mostly a matter of obtaining a description or profile of roles and responsibilities from each school. Sources would include at least the teachers and the principal.

Curriculum: Goals

- Are there goals and objectives for the need area? How well do they conform to the standards of the ideal description?

Curriculum: Content

- The major task in this sub-area is to examine the existing scope and sequence for each school, looking for consistency and fit. If a scope and sequence does not exist, it will be necessary to develop one.

Curriculum: Methods

- A teacher questionnaire would be most useful here.
- Develop an observation schedule for sampling purposes.
- It might be useful to develop a school profile of methods now in use and compare this to the goals and the scope and sequence.

Curriculum: Evaluation

- In this sub-area the committee will need to discern the various evaluation systems now in use and compare the types with other sub-areas of curriculum for consistency and fit.

Resources:

- All of the sub-areas of "resources" require that the committee simply inventory what now exists. If schools do not have up-to-date inventories, they need to develop them. Don't forget the materials in individual classrooms. This inventory of physical and human resources is then compared to the needs in each of the other areas.

Management: Organization

- Each principal should submit an organizational chart and explanation to the committee.
- Teachers' perceptions about the organization of their school should be collected to compare with the formal organizational charts.

Management: Knowledge and Skills

- Formal assessment processes such as the ROME competencies are available to school systems (see the **Resource Guide**).
- As with teachers, a self-assessment questionnaire is almost a necessity.
- Interviews and feedback from central office staff, teachers and students can be informative.

Management: Attitudes

- All of the methods recommended under "Staff: Attitudes" will apply to principals generally.

Community: Support/Communication

- A community questionnaire (by mail or in the newspaper) is a must to gauge community attitudes and support.
- Town meetings, church meetings, meetings with civic groups can all provide information to the schools about the community's position on and feelings about education.

Community: Resources

- This sub-area is similar to the major area of Resources; it requires an inventory of the human and physical resources available and the community's willingness to share its resources.

Finally, there are several sources of information that are more general in nature and will apply to several of the areas. Some of these are:

- System self-study data if it is fairly current.
- Past Needs Assessments.
- The last Southern Association study.
- Demographic data.
- Interviews and/or questionnaires to graduates and drop-outs.
- Interviews and/or questionnaires to present employers of graduates.

The above suggestions are, of course, far from exhaustive. The core committee and school community will be able to come up with many more techniques for data collection and use. It should be emphasized once more that some of these areas and sub-areas may not apply to the need under investigation. If the need has been refined to the point of stating, for example, "Our teachers need to increase their competencies in reading instruction," it would be a waste of time to look at "Resources" other than those in curriculum and training assistance.

If the need description has been precise and is well understood by all groups, and the methods of data collection have been carefully identified and collectors prepared, the actual collection will be a mechanical task. The various subcommittees which function as part of the causal

analysis will need to design plans and procedures and determine timelines. Inter-committee work must also be coordinated. Therefore, the coordinator must keep in constant touch with each subcommittee and must provide the background data previously collected to help orient each group.

Finally, the committee needs to collect all of the information, data summaries, etc. at one place for consideration by the core group. Here again the committee will be faced with the task of applying their subjective judgements to a body of information, feelings, values, inferences and opinion. This, however, is essentially what will be necessary to complete Task 3.

☐ **Task 3: Place causal factors in priority order**

As areas are investigated a great deal of information and hypotheses will be generated. Therefore, a necessary task is to rank causes in order to facilitate the selection of the most appropriate educational improvement programs, since it will be infeasible to address all causal factors. There are no clear-cut rules for creating this list. The difficulty of synthesizing the various kinds of data into a meaningful whole for decision-making is evident. The best advice that can be given is that a distillation process be used, a process guided by professional judgements and school realities. Thus, subjective decisions on what is most likely to have inpact on remediating the need should be the guide to the ranking of probable causes. But there will be much more data to guide selection than would have been available at the end of the perceived needs analysis. After causes have been discussed and placed in priority order, choose causes which will be attacked. There are a couple of "rules of thumb" which can be used in placing the causal factors in priority order and in choosing areas to attack:

1. Which causes have the greatest potential for being resolved?
2. Which involve the greatest or least numbers of people?
3. Are we sophisticated enough to resolve them?
4. Which causes are people most easily convinced should be remediated?
5. Which solutions have already been tried or not tried?
6. Are there a variety of alternatives available for resolving a particular cause?

☐ **Task 4: Evaluate the needs assessment**

Try to think of needs assessment as an on-going process. A recycling plan to continue the process in future years might be a good idea. In that light, the district needs assessment should be reviewed in its entirety.

Review the tasks and steps in which the system has just engaged by using the accompanying **Needs Assessment: A Checklist Of Steps** as an evaluative tool to see that each step was dealt with to the committee's satisfaction. If not, it may be necessary to remedy the situation immediately or make recommendations which would be dealt with in future assessments. There are a number of additional points which deserve attention in reviewing and summing up major concerns of the needs assessment:

1. A needs assessment is never completed. It must be a continuous process and changes in needs are to be expected.

2. A need is not a solution. Pre-conceived solutions must be left out of statements of discrepancies, or they bias the outcome and restrict the use of innovative or creative ways to solve a problem.

3. Priorities in causal areas might be judged by two criteria: (a) what does it cost (both in funds, time and impact) to meet the need, and (b) what does it cost to ignore the need?

4. Justification for applying resources to some needs and not to others must occur.

5. Data should be available from which to select solutions for the remediation of the need.

To help evaluate further the needs assessment project, a list of assessment questions (which could also be considered when planning the needs assessment program) is included.

Evaluation Questions

Product

1. Were critical learner needs identified?

2. Were characteristics of the learners with the needs (target population) identified?

3. Were the needs useful in short-range or long-range planning efforts?

4. Were the needs applicable for consideration in budget preparation and allocation of resources such as staff, time, materials?

5. Were there product as well as process needs?

Process

1. Was the process for determining needs clear to the participants?

2. Would additional training have expedited the implementation of the process?

3. Were needs ranked from most important to least important?

4. Did participants and the management team feel the procedure for analyzing the data was satisfactory?

5. Was the collected data inclusive enough to identify needs accurately?

6. Was the method for validating the identified needs satisfactory to the participants?

7. Were the methods for collecting data satisfactory to participants? To those providing the information?

Participation

1. Was the method for selecting participants fair?

2. Were the groups actively involved (i.e. did they attend meetings, receive and return surveys and participate on committees)?

3. Were the participants able to express their views openly and completely?

4. Could significant minority opinion be identified and presented along with the majority views?

Management

1. Was the top administration committed to the process?
2. Was the top administration committed to resolving the identified needs?
3. Were the lines of responsibility for implementing the process clearly established?
4. Did the managers of the needs assessment project receive the necessary information training for conducting the needs assessment?

Communication

1. Did everyone (teachers, administration, students, community) understand the purpose of the needs assessment process?
2. Were they informed as to how they could participate?
3. Did they evaluate and give feedback on their participation in the project?
4. Were they notified of the results of the needs assessment phase?

Budget

1. Was the amount of money allocated sufficient?
2. Was the amount of time and money expended worth the results?

The need for carefully evaluating the needs assessment can not be over-emphasized. The core committee is about to make recommendations to the school system about which need(s) are of greatest importance and the areas of the school environment which ought to be changed in order to remedy the need(s). It is on the basis of this committee's decision that all other decisions will be made leading to implementation of an improvement program. A mistake or oversight in the needs assessment will have increasing effects throughout the selection, implementation and evaluation of an improvement effort.

Many implementations have failed because of a problem in the needs assessment. Now is the time to discover any problems in the system's needs assessment, while they can be remedied.

☐ **Task 5: Develop a report of causal findings**

If the needs assessment process recommended here has been followed, the committee has

1. gathered the perceived needs of a cross-section of educational practitioners and consumers,
2. verified their needs by collecting objective data,
3. established a priority list of system needs and chosen one or more on which to concentrate system efforts,
4. analyzed the specific causes of these needs, and

5. selected a manageable number of causal factors to attack with an improvement effort.

All the information that will be needed to develop an accurate, useful statement of needs is now on hand. This statement may be very close to what everyone thought should have been addressed in the first place, or it may be quite different. In either case, considerable advantage has been gained from the needs assessment because

1. A large proportion of the professionals, students and public has been involved in the process of examination, and the committee has increased support for any improvement effort which might now be undertaken.

2. For any improvement program(s) now selected, the school system will have supportive documentation for its selection. An appeal to any state or federal agency for funding will require such support documentation. Needs Assessment is only the beginning; the selection and implementation of solutions is yet to come.

3. Most important of all, it is now more certain that any solution(s) which might be selected will be better matched to the true needs of the system and therefore more likely to be accepted, to be implemented successfully and to last as an integral part of the educational program.

A full report should be submitted to the superintendent and to the Board emphasizing these points. Perhaps presentations to the central administrative staff or at principal meetings are advisable. The faculty, student body and community also need to know what specific changes are being addressed. Superintendents might want to send copies of the district's list of critical needs to Senators and Representatives at both the state and national levels. Having current and community-based information about local educational priorities could be an aid to them as they make educational policy decisions. Superintendents might also want to share with other districts information about what their needs are, how they arrived at them, and what possibilities exist for remedying them.

Teachers are policy-makers at a critical level. On-going information about needs assessment and its results might be a good topic for discussion at faculty meetings.

Besides these in-school and community groups, other parties may have an interest in the needs assessment report, or the report may be used in other ways. For example, the needs assessment, as outlined here, could be used as part of the process for securing State Department of Education Title IV funds in Georgia.

Listed below are elements which can be considered for inclusion in a final report:

1. The results (the identified and selected needs and causes)

2. The methods for determining and validating needs

3. Samples of instruments

4. Tables containing a breakdown of those participating (and how samples were selected)

5. The problems which may have occurred

6. Recommendations for future assessments (including detailed accounts of each phase)

7. Commitments on the part of educational leaders on how to use the results.

Review Step 5, Task 3, **Communicate Findings to the Public,** and the **Resource Guide** (Part 6) for additional advice on preparing a report. The **Resource Guide** (Parts 2 and 5) contains sample news releases and articles entitled "Informing the Community" and "Summarizing the Data." Every possible avenue for reporting and publicity should be explored, including

1. Annual reports
2. Booklets
3. Discussion groups
4. Leaflets
5. Letters
6. Meetings
7. Filmstrips
8. Home visits
9. Motion pictures
10. Newsletters
11. Newspapers
12. Open houses
13. Posters
14. Pupils
15. Radio
16. Staff Personnel (Non-Instructional)
17. Slides
18. Speeches
19. Teachers
20. Telephone
21. Television

We hope the three publications on needs assessment have provided a practical, efficient, defensible and effective process to identify each system's unique problems and to form the basis for identifying successful solutions. If you need specific assistance or have further questions, please contact

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